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## United Way of the Chattahoochee Valley sets \$6.45M campaign goal

BY ALLISON KENNEDY

Kjirsten Letourneaux put a face on United Way on Thursday, as the annual Chattahoochee Valley campaign in the ballroom of the Columbus Convention & Trade Center.

"I suffer from disease. It's called addiction. But I didn't wake up one day and say, 'Hey, I think I'll waste 17 years of my life,'" Letourneaux told a lunchtime crowd of more than 1,000. After she started drinking at age 17, Letourneaux turned to marijuana and cocaine. Then, while jailed on drug charges a few years ago, Letourneaux learned about the T.I.M.E. from another inmate.

Letourneaux, 37, said she was attracted to the drug recovery residence — supported by the United Way — for the "sense of belonging; and I knew it was where I needed to be."

She landed in the home, which stands for "This I Must Earn," in January 2007. She now has a management restaurant, an apartment near Lakebottom Park and is saving money for college.

United Way of the Chattahoochee Valley unveiled a goal of \$6.45 million Thursday. It's \$500,000 less than last year's but campaign chairman Billy Blanchard of Columbus Bank & Trust said calls to local businesses so far have exceeded that goal.

"There are some companies that are struggling and wrestling with tough (financial) issues," said Blanchard. "But I have not seen a decrease in enthusiasm."

A little more than \$1 million has been pledged so far, Blanchard said.

The Thursday luncheon, emceed by Teresa Whitaker of WRBL, had an outdoor picnic theme. Red and white tablecloths were tied to chairs, and picnic baskets, containing boxes of Cheez-It crackers, served as table centerpieces. The program featured teens from Smiths Station, Ala., leading line dancing to music.

Scott Ferguson is president and CEO of United Way of the Chattahoochee Valley. He, too, made brief remarks.

"This United Way is one of the best United Ways in the nation," Ferguson said. Statistics back up his claim. Ninety percent of the 1,250 agencies met their 2008 goal. The Chattahoochee Valley was one, and it ranks among the top 100 in the U.S. It assists 25 local agencies in various social services.

As the campaign moves forward, Blanchard will be assisted by 28 loaned executives and 16 others who serve on a cabinet.

Most pledges are expected to be in by year's end, Ferguson said, with the celebration in January.

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